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Axing EPA Regions Could Bolster Staff Cut Plans: EPA Veterans

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By Brian Dabbs

A tentative plan to shed two EPA regional offices could aid the White House quest for severe agency staff cuts, former EPA officials and a current high-level employee told Bloomberg BNA.

Forced staff cuts, targeted severance, early retirements and other voluntary departures from the agency all could accompany such a move, those interviewed said.

But so far, that tentative plan is little more than an abstract policy prescription, and implementation would be a herculean, highly detailed task.

The White House Office of Management and Budget recently floated the plan in preparing fiscal year 2018 budget recommendations, according to the current high-level employee, who requested anonymity. Analysis from former staffers and news reports corroborate that account.

The White House budget blueprint, which surfaced March 16, called for a 3,200 reduction in EPA staff.

The agency currently employs roughly 15,000 people, and a reduction of that size would plunge the EPA to staff levels unseen since the early 1980s. A White House budget, however, is typically the opening salvo in a months-long negotiation with lawmakers to enact appropriations legislation.

Fertile Ground for Cuts?

Nearly 7,300 EPA employees work out of the 10 regional offices as of early March, according to data provided by the EPA.

That number, coupled with employees housed at laboratory complexes throughout the country, outweighs the number of employees based in the agency's Washington D.C. headquarters.

"The agency could find a lot of numbers to reduce staff to some very radical target if it looked at regions simply because there are more people working for the agency in the ten regional offices," said Karl Brooks, who served under former EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy as a top resource management official following a stint as Region 7 administrator.

The EPA didn't comment on the proposal to eliminate regional offices.

headquarters. "Is there overlap? Yeah, I'd say there's overlap, and the regions are probably the prime location to look for some of that overlap."

The White House budget blueprint contains only two pages on the EPA but calls for the elimination of more than 50 EPA programs and a nearly one-third budget decrease. A traditionally thorough budget is expected in May.

Appropriations bills, which require congressional approval before a president's signature, set total full-time employee levels for agencies. Republican lawmakers, according to recent interviews, are so far staying on the sidelines of the debate over regional closures.

"I'm sure between Ryan Jackson and Scott Pruitt, they'll figure it out," Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), the former chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, told Bloomberg BNA. Jackson, a former Inhofe staffer, recently took the EPA chief of staff position under new Administrator Scott Pruitt.

Staff Cut Policy

Those interviewed, however, differed on how the regional cuts would actually be executed.

The high-level EPA employee, an office director who requested anonymity because of strict agency policies on speaking to the press, said the abolition of a regional office would leave those employees no recourse to salvage jobs at the agency.

"If you abolish an entire regional office, [the employees] have no bumping rights outside their geographic area," that employee told Bloomberg BNA, referring to a process where employees with more experience and better ratings take the place of employees with less experience or worse ratings when cuts are necessary. "They want those 3,000 [employees] out, and the only way you can do that is you've got to abolish programs."

Forced cuts called reductions-in-force (RIF) involve a "bumping process" and require approval from OMB and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). The EPA hasn't moved forward with a RIF process since its inception in 1970 under President Richard Nixon.



'Substantial Expenditure'

Regional hubs are located in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Dallas, Kansas City, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle.

The sheer number of regional employees and associated costs is likely to entice administration officials backing the cuts, Ed Krenik, a Bracewell LLP attorney and former EPA official in the George W. Bush Administration, told Bloomberg BNA.

"It's a substantial expenditure for each of these regions," Krenik said, noting that each region employs staff members who report to specific program offices at

Transfer to Other Regions?

But Stan Meiburg, the acting deputy administrator under McCarthy, said employees at eliminated regions could argue to keep their jobs if their duties are simply shifted to another remaining region.

"Assuming you kept the same level of current services, you'd still have to people who do those things," Meiburg told Bloomberg BNA. "It wouldn't just be a simple matter of 'oh, let's shut down region x and region y and RIF,' and just poof, everything devolves to other regions. It would take a lot of analysis to figure out how to structure that."

The White House-proposed budget and program cuts would slash at least some basic services. Still, Meiburg said region office closures would possibly only lop off top-level leadership at those offices, as opposed to rank-and-file employees.

Other agencies have retooled their regional framework in the past. The Census Bureau in recent years axed half its regional offices and sought a formal RIF process. The Commerce Department, which houses the Census, later said most agency departures were voluntary. Other employees shifted to other regions, Commerce said.

The bureau didn't respond to a Bloomberg BNA request for comment on whether a RIF process actually took place.

Encouraging Departures

The EPA has already reduced its staff totals significantly over the past decade. Agency staff averaged around 17,500 from 2000-2010, and now roughly 15,000 full-time employees work for the EPA.

That reduction is the result of a campaign to encourage early retirement or other incentives to depart.

About 450 employees took the EPA up in 2014 on those offers, which involved \$11.3 million in incentives, the agency's Office of Inspector General said in a report released March 23.

"The most common goal in the EPA program and regional office requests was the acquisition of new skills, and the second-most frequent goal was to target nonessential positions," the report said, noting that EPA complied with Office of Personnel Management requirements. "According to some of the EPA requests, the agency had positions that were considered no longer essential to operations."

Meanwhile, roughly 500-600 employees retire or leave the agency voluntarily on an annual basis, Meiburg said. That, alongside a continuation of the current hiring freeze, would bring down EPA staff totals.

Many EPA specialists expect an uptick in retirements due to likely drastic changes at the agency.

Region Elimination Impact

EPA regional hubs are located near a wide range of other agency field offices, which follow the same regional framework as the EPA.

Interagency coordination is common. The EPA works alongside the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the General Services Administration and others. But on top of the regional closures, the new administration under President Trump may aim to transfer EPA regional offices to more rural areas to cut back on rent and utility costs, the anonymous EPA employee said.

A new report, authored by former EPA employees George Wyeth, Ruth Greenspan Bell and others, painted a dire picture of the regional closure and broader budget proposal.

"Together with the proposals for draconian staff and budget cuts, regional office consolidation would throw EPA into turmoil, making it extremely difficult if not impossible to get its remaining work done," the report, which was provided to Bloomberg BNA, said.

"Reducing staff in EPA programs and consolidating regional offices means that EPA cannot be as responsive when states need guidance on carrying out their programs. Fewer regional offices means that states in the affected regions would have to consult with federal officials who are farther away and less familiar with their local conditions."

Krenik, however, said the agency is able to trim and remain effective. Still, the budget blueprint, like all White House budgets, is not likely to convert directly into policy, he said, suggesting congressional push back.

"It's a message document, and I don't anticipate that a lot of [Trump's] suggestions are going to be implemented by the Congress," Krenik said. "Realistically, people have to look and say 'the federal government's discretionary budget is going to be reduced.' The question is how much."

—With assistance from Renee Schoof

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